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KHRUSHCHEV REINSTATES DEADLINE FOR RETURN ON BERLIN

In his Moscow press conference on June 3, Khrushchev went further than at any time since the Camp David talks in proclaiming a deadline by which the USSR intends to initiate action toward a separate peace treaty with the GDR and hence toward abrogation of Western rights respecting Berlin. He stated that if after six to eight months the West refuses to come to a summit conference and does not "want to solve ripe problems," Soviet action would be initiated. This threat, although still somewhat hedged, is evidently designed to underline Moscow's past assertions that it cannot wait indefinitely for an agreed Berlin settlement and to put an incoming US administration on notice that it will have to show itself amenable to negotiations on Berlin or face a threat to the Western position there.

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Press Conference Statement

In his press conference, Khrushchev was asked by a Soviet correspondent (the question was probably planted) what he thought of reports that there might be no summit meeting in six to eight months. He replied as follows:

Obviously some people think that if there is no summit conference the question of concluding a peace treaty with Germany and a solution of the problem of West Berlin arising therefrom will be postponed indefinitely. If such people exist, they are wrong. If we see at the end of this period that the governments of the Western countries do not want to meet, do not want to solve the ripe problems, we shall agree with the socialist countries, we shall meet, shall appeal to all countries that want to sign a German peace treaty. We shall meet, discuss and sign a peace treaty.

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He went on to assert that such a peace treaty would end Western rights respecting West Berlin.

It will be noted that Khrushchev's separate peace treaty threat is conditioned not only on Western refusal to agree to meet (or actually to meet) at a summit within six to eight months but also on Western unwillingness to "solve ripe problems." This formulation would appear to provide for Soviet abstention from unilateral action if the West had conveyed its readiness to negotiate on Berlin in some way other than at a summit conference when the six-to-eight-month period elapses. Khrushchev's position thus remains hedged. Nevertheless, by stipulating a time limit of six to eight months, Khrushchev has done something that he had avoided doing since the Camp David talks.

Background

In private and public statements during and since the abortive summit conference, Soviet spokesmen had indicated that the USSR would abstain from unilateral action respecting Berlin -- provided the West also refrained from unilateral actions -- during the six to eight months which Khrushchev suggested at Paris should intervene before a new summit conference.¹ In his Paris press conference on May 18, Khrushchev did say that Soviet efforts to reach agreement were "almost exhausted" and that when they were "exhausted completely" a separate peace treaty would be signed. But he named no time limit.

In his Berlin speech on May 20, he again reverted to the formula -- which had become standard in Soviet pronouncements in the weeks prior to the summit -- to the effect that if the West refused to show readiness to settle the Berlin issue, the USSR would proceed with a separate treaty. Again, he avoided an explicit time limit, but by implication he introduced one. He said that the existing situation regarding West Berlin would be maintained "until the meeting of the heads of government which, it should be assumed, will take place in six to eight months." The novelty of the June 3 statement is that it makes the implication contained in the Berlin speech explicit.

Significance

Several recent intelligence reports of varying reliability and plausibility have suggested that East German Party leader Ulbricht had been exerting pressure on Khrushchev to initiate unilateral action respecting Berlin and that Khrushchev had committed himself to do so. Khrushchev's

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1. It should be noted that this formula does not rule out altogether some Soviet unilateral move before six to eight months have elapsed, since Moscow could, if it chose, arbitrarily accuse the West of unilateral action.

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June 3 reinstatement of a time limit tends to lend some credence to these reports. At the same time, Khrushchev himself has, ever since Camp David, stressed that he could not wait "indefinitely" for a Berlin settlement. These statements were evidently designed to maintain pressure on the West to come to terms under threat of eventual Soviet unilateral action.

Khrushchev's latest remark is, therefore, consistent with his own previous position. It may have been designed to scotch some Western suggestions that he torpedoed the summit in order to cover a Soviet retreat regarding Berlin. In addition, and more important, it is probably intended to put an incoming US administration on notice that it must be amenable to negotiation on Berlin or face unilateral Soviet action.

Public Soviet statements regarding the need to make new efforts toward a peace treaty with both German states (including a Berlin "solution"), and the above-cited intelligence reports suggest that the USSR is likely to put forward new proposals on Germany even before the six-to-eight-month period elapses. These could include a new variant of the January 10, 1959 draft peace treaty or the as yet unpublished proposal for an interim agreement on Berlin which the USSR transmitted to France on May 9. The Soviet purpose in making such proposals would be (1) to demonstrate continued Soviet willingness to negotiate, provided there was a "reliable" negotiating partner in the US, and (2) to lay the groundwork, in the event of adverse Western reaction, for "justified" unilateral action. Basically, Moscow appears still to prefer an agreed Berlin arrangement to unilateral action on its part. And, like the May 9 proposal, any new Soviet initiative may contain enough of interest to draw the West into talks some time early next year.

In his June 3 press conference, Khrushchev again made clear that in the Soviet view a separate peace treaty would extinguish Western rights in, and on the access routes to, West Berlin. However, Khrushchev reverted to the Soviet position of November 1958 in stating that the West could re-negotiate its access rights with the GDR. This had also been his position in his Gorkiy Park press conference on May 11. This contrasts with his assertions at Baku on April 25 and in his May 18 press conference in Paris that a separate treaty would mean the West would have to vacate Berlin.

Press Conference Transcript Doctored. In his effort to discredit President Eisenhower personally and Western policy on Germany, Khrushchev asserted during his June 3 press conference (according to the unanimous versions of Western correspondents,) that the President at Camp David had come out in opposition to German unification because of fear of a strong Germany. These Western press accounts drew a denial from the White House shortly before noon on June 3 (i.e., around 1600 GMT). The TASS transcript of the press conference, which began to be disseminated at 1750 GMT, amended Khrushchev's remarks to read simply that the President, at an unspecified occasion, had said the United States is afraid of a strong Germany.

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